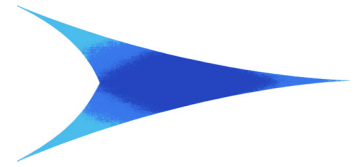


The Southern Cross Group

Promoting Mobility in the Global Community
www.southern-cross-group.org



MEDIA RELEASE

Overseas Australians Will Suffer at Next Election

The Southern Cross Group (SCG) has condemned electoral legislation adopted by Parliament last week and also labelled the Government's "interim response" to the Senate's March 2005 Expatriates Inquiry Report as "not good enough".

Eligible voters outside Australia when the next election is called will run a strong risk of being disenfranchised if their enrolment details are not in order with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) before the election announcement.

The *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2006* was passed by the Senate on 21 June 2006 and is due to come into force soon. It means that Australians abroad (and in Australia) not on the electoral roll when an election is called will only have until 8pm on the day the writ is issued to get their enrolment forms in to the AEC. Generally the writ is issued the next working day after the announcement of an election. Currently, the law provides for the electoral roll to close seven days after the election writ is issued, but the new legislation means that this window will now generally be reduced for those not on the roll to a little over 24 hours in most future elections.

People who are enrolled at the time the election is called, but who need to update their details with the AEC, will have until 8pm on the third working day after the issue of the writ. 17 year-olds who turn 18 between the day the writ is issued and election day, and people who are granted citizenship between those times, will also have until 8pm on the third working day to enrol from scratch.

SCG Australian Co-ordinator John MacGregor in Canberra strongly urged all overseas Australians to get their enrolment details in order now, and in any event well ahead of the next federal election, tipped to be in the period August to December 2007. "Australians abroad, most of them in time zones behind Australia, are now much more likely than those in Australia not to hear about an election until after the roll closes" he said.

Hundreds of thousands of Australian citizens of voting age living abroad are presently prevented by law from enrolling, even if they were to try to do so before the closing of the rolls for the next election. If they have resided outside Australia for more than three years, and are no longer on the electoral roll, they are disenfranchised for the remainder of the period that they live abroad. The SCG estimates that at least half a million expats fall into this category.

Mr MacGregor said that the Senate Committee which carried out the Inquiry into Australian Expatriates recommended amendments to remove the three-year restriction in March 2005. But the Government has not yet properly responded to the Senate Committee's report. On 22 June 2006, Senator Amanda Vanstone tabled a so-called "interim response" in the Senate which merely stated that "the proposed response is being considered and will be tabled in due course".

"This is just not good enough, when a record 677 organisations and individuals around the world invested their precious time and resources in the period late 2003 to early 2005 to participate in the Expatriates Inquiry", he said. But the Government fails to meet its three-month deadline for responding to Senate Committee Reports in almost 76% of cases. The oldest Senate Report still requiring a full government response dates from March 2000.

In an effort to ameliorate the negative impact of the three-year technicality while it remains law, the SCG has proposed a host of intensified electoral education measures directed at departing Australians and those already abroad, in a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Education dated 21 June 2006.

Are you an expat not sure whether you can still vote from abroad? See:

http://www.southern-cross-group.org/archives/Overseas%20Voting/2006/Brochure_Expats_Voting_April_2006.pdf

And check out the AEC website:

http://www.aec.gov.au/_content/what/enrolment/elig_os.htm

To read the SCG's submission and others made to the Civics and Electoral Education Inquiry go to:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/em/education/subs.htm>

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The Southern Cross Group is a global non-profit volunteer-run advocacy and support organisation for the Australian diaspora.

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